Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction

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Abstract

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Maude Matton Tremblay

The *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* research-creation project explores the possibilities to envision and manifest prison abolition through science fiction filmmaking. Building from adrienne maree brown's 'Emergent Strategy' and non-hierarchical organizing principles, I hosted a workshop with prison abolitionist and transformative justice activists and artists Amina Mohamed, Nikki Shaffeeullah, Lolo Sirois, Romina Hernández and Ariane Lorrain. In the following months, we co-created a 10-minute film about a prison drone who joins the prison abolitionist movement. Using archival footage as the backdrop, the film is an attempt to transform state representation of prisons through comedy and satire. This accompanying research explains our exploration of how collective filmmaking approaches could help us create worlds without prisons. In this paper, I situate my positionality in relation to prison abolition, I locate the project within broader movements for prison abolition, transformative justice and visionary fiction, and I elaborate on the methodology behind the making of the workshop and film.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In the current landscape of Canadian criminal and migrant "justice" systems, we are so accustomed to strategies of incarceration and detainment that it has become difficult to imagine a justice system that exists without them. Whereas the mainstream public discussions mostly focus on prison reform, prison abolitionists such as Angela Davis, Joy James, Ruth Morris and the INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence Collective, have long been pushing for alternatives to the carceral punitive system. Yet, even as the failures of the "prison industrial complex" are becoming increasingly obvious (M. Davis 229), abolition is disregarded by most as a utopian, unrealistic idea (A. Davis 10).

Angela Y. Davis says that "the most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor" (21). It has now been over a decade since Davis called for the imagination of alternative systems of justice, and the need for this is becoming increasingly urgent. While alternative justice movements have only been growing stronger in the recent years, the current situation in North America is far from Davis' vision; as hundreds of migrants are being held in Canadian Detention Centers for indefinite periods of time, while thousands of youth as well as adults are living confined lives in prisons across the country. In the United States, prisons continue to expand, in large part due to the privatization of prisons and prisons as the newest element of "economic revival" (Greene 4).

Davis' call for creatively re-imagining justice systems is what inspires me. As a filmmaker, I believe that one exciting forum for the creative process of imagining what worlds without prisons could look like is through the genre of science fiction, which conveys narratives

about past and future worlds, inspired by aspects of our own contemporary realities, while pushing beyond boundaries of supposed possibility (Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future").

For my project, I am drawing from adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha's approach to science fiction and social change. These two authors and editors coined the term "visionary fiction" from which my research draws heavily. Imarisha explains that visionary fiction, which could be defined as speculative fiction with a feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial lens,

> centers those who have been marginalized in larger society, especially those who live at the intersections of identities and oppressions. This fundamentally feminist framework is perhaps best epitomized in (Octavia) Butler's work. The majority of her main characters are women or trans folks of color, and when those characters move to the center of society, we see visionary communities emerge. (Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future")

Inspired by this turn of science fiction for social change, in late November 2017, I hosted a 2-day workshop where I invited activists and artists involved in visionary fiction and transformative justice movements to discuss, envision and create together around the questions: What would worlds without prisons, detention centers, borders and other forms of confinement look like? What would these worlds feel like? How can science fiction help us manifest these visions? And the main question of this project; how could a collective filmmaking approach help us explore the possibilities to create worlds without prisons? The general aims of the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop were to attempt to collectively come up with an idea for a science fiction film that we would create in the following months. The workshop was central to the making of the film as it provided the structure in which the

participants and I shared our ideas and desires for the film. Based on the discussions and brainstorming session from the workshop, the workshop participants and I developed a script and filmed a short science fiction film about a prison drone developing empathy and joining the prison abolition movement.

The participants and collaborators of the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* projects were artist and prison abolitionist Nikki Shaffeeullah, migrant justice and anti-gentrification activist Romina Hernández, community organizer Amina Mohamed, set designer and activist Lolo Sirois, and cinematographer Ariane Lorrain. I was interested in creating a space for this group to convene and explore what new relationships and connections might evolve. Importantly my emphasis was to focus on the process rather than the final result of the project. This led me to design a collective filmmaking approach for the project specifically, drawing from non-hierarchical organizing processes. I was particularly inspired by adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* principles that emphasize the power of visionary fiction, and following the legacy of science fiction author Octavia E. Butler, draw from patterns observed in nature to best see how we can inform and shape our activist movements (brown 23).

In Chapter 1, I will explore my positionality in relation to this project. In Chapter 2, I will situate the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop and film within the prison abolition and transformative justice legacy. In Chapter 3, I will locate the project in relation to the movements for science fiction for social change. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will explain the collective filmmaking and emergent strategy methodologies I employed during the project.

Chapter 1: Positionality

Situated Knowledges

It is important for me to personally situate myself in relation to this research and project. My approach to positionality more specifically draws from feminist theorist Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges in which she argues "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (Haraway 195). Haraway goes on to explains that she believes that:

> The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits, i.e., the view from above, but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions, i.e., of views from somewhere. (196)

This understanding of situated knowledges is particularly relevant for my approach to collective filmmaking and to my positionality as an ally in the movement for prison abolition. I believe that situating myself as transparently as possible allows for deeper connections and facilitates meaningful opportunities for learning. In the following chapters, I will therefore situate my positionality and I will explain the methods that I employed to create the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop and film.

Academia and Family Legacy

As I will further explore in Chapter 3: Prison Abolition and Transformative Justice, the fact that I

am instigating this transformative justice inclined project within academia is quite complex due to academia's complicity with the prison industrial complex. Furthermore, the reality that this project is instigated by myself, a white queer woman, falls slightly uneasily in regards to the *Incite!* legacy which promotes transformative justice movements that center women of colour, and are initiated by them directly.

I have had to sit in this discomfort and I have come to the understanding that the only way this project would make sense was if I was transparent about my positionality. My father was a prison director. He is actually retired now, but that was his job when I was a child. Back then, I obviously didn't have the same understanding of politics that I have now and his job didn't have the same meaning to me as it currently does. At the time, it translated to me as meaning that he was always extremely stressed, paranoid and strict. I now understand that he was not just a 'usual' level of strict. It turns out that I am a quite resilient being and I always stood up to him. Throughout my childhood, I'd always try to confront his controlling habits and get him to understand me, and when I reached the place where I realized there was no way that would ever be possible, I began finding other strategies to resist. My parents finally divorced when I was a teenager and I never had to live with him again. We have maintained somewhat of a distant relationship since then, seeing each other maybe twice a year and making brief small talk.

During the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop, we had a discussion about what brought us to do prison abolition work and when this topic came up, Amina Mohammed asked me if my father knew about the work that I am doing now and whether I ever brought up prison abolition with him. The answer to that is complex because it is so tied to my personal relationship with my father. While I wish that I could engage in discussions with

him that could have transformative benefits, it is not possible. At the current time, as well as throughout my childhood, my father has continuously made it impossible to have any meaningful conversation around this topic. Although I really value having conversations with other family members who contribute to or participate in systems of oppression, it is something that I had to give up in relation to my father and this is partly why I find it is really important to do this work through film.

I believe that my positionality has a real impact on my work in relation to prison abolition and transformative justice. I situate myself not only as someone whose whiteness benefits from and is complicit with the prison industrial complex (Singh 1093) and as someone who was fed and housed by money coming directly from that system, but also as someone who learned to be resilient and survive different forms of violence perpetrated by a parent who was so perfectly trained by the prison's ruling and controlling ideology. As an ally, I truly believe that it is important for me to do activist work that aims at dismantling systems from which I benefit and, under this light, prison abolition is a specifically crucial one for me.

Collective Filmmaking

While I am part of different activist organizing, I also believe that filmmaking is the creative process that best allows me to articulate and explore emerging feelings and thoughts in relation to the systems I am attempting to fight against. Film allows me to create and explore these visions with other artists and activists who inspire me. It is also an art form that can affect each viewer in such a different way and I find its power to spark a space of discussion where audience members can share their different perceptions very interesting.

As a queer feminist filmmaker, I am deeply interested in creative collective approaches to filmmaking. While I did my undergraduate studies in Film Studies at the *Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema*, I am completely self-taught in regards to film production and film making, having learned in collaboration with other queer women and trans filmmakers. I am also quite new in terms of directing or producing my own projects. The first film I co-directed, *City* of *Steel* (2015), was a collaboration with poet and activist Alisha Mascarenhas. It is a short documentary that focuses on two annual marches and vigils for missing and murdered Indigenous women. The film interweaves a critical analysis and interrogation of the tensions, possibilities, and paradoxes of organized resistance on stolen unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory, or the island we call Montreal. The making of the film was a slow process as Alisha and I collaborated together on all aspects of the film and maintained constant open dialogue with the organizers of the marches.

The second and latest film I co-directed was *Swarm of Selenium* (2017), a queer science fiction short film about collective healing, trauma, and other world-making. The film was shot in Berlin in spring of 2016 by a crew of more than 40 women, nonbinary and trans artists from Montreal, Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna, Marseilles and Minneapolis. I initiated this project after being selected to do an artist residency at the feminist art space *District* in Berlin, reaching out to a few artists and friends whose works inspire me. The project rapidly expanded, bringing together incredible queer feminist artists and providing us with a space to experiment with collective filmmaking practices. We created the film in non-hierarchical and collective ways, approaching filmmaking through a different lens and allowing space for each of our creative relationships to grow.

Building from these experiences, my interest in filmmaking lives in its potential to convey collective visions, or to at least offer the tools to get as close to them as we possibly can.

I also believe that film is a powerful platform that allows to tangibly center the voices of marginalized people, resonating with Imarisha and brown's goals with visionary fiction. I am thus truly intrigued by the possibility of creating science fiction works which would aim to contribute to the visions for and abolition of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (Hooks 1), and by extension the abolition of the prison system.

Facing my own positionality in relation to the prison industrial complex and this project taking place within academia, I additionally desired to use the time that I was to devote to this master's project as well as the resources offered by the university to create a film with prison abolitionist aims in critical resistance to academia's complicity with the prison industrial complex.

Chapter 2: Prison Abolition and Transformative Justice

Angela Y. Davis argues that "an abolitionist approach (…) would require us to imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society" (107). Prison abolition, in a filmmaking context, manifests itself in productions that oppose mainstream representations of prison in film and other visual media which too often reinforce, as cultural critic Gina Dent explains, "the institution of the prison as a naturalized part of our social landscape" (qtd. in A. Davis 17). Instead, prison abolitionist films and media deconstruct the ways in which prisons are normalized and propose alternatives visions of justice. I believe that while the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* film stands on its own as a comedic science fictional critique of the prison system and its ideologies, it is also important to locate it within the legacy of prison abolitionist theory and alternative justice movements that currently exist in this (non-science fictional) world. While it is realistically impossible for this paper to address the entirety of these movements in their complexity, I will offer an overview of some of the alternative justice approaches in North America and how they aim to oppose the violence of prisons, detention centers, borders and policing.

Criminalizing ideologies

Prison abolition is not about suddenly getting rid of all prisons in one simple act, but rather, as Angela Davis explains, about creating a world in which their existence is rendered no longer necessary (107). Prison abolition is therefore about movements of decarceration that center the questions of how we hold each other accountable, how we respond to harm and how we help and support each other's healing through approaches that do not rely on the prison or the police. It is

also a movement that attempts to shift the ways in which we think about criminalization, and this is where I personally believe that media plays an important role as it can have a strong influence on how audiences perceive the world. As Mariame Kaba puts it, prison abolition "will require much farther-reaching social transformation in the way we think about crime, punishment, property, and how we relate to one another" (qtd. in Dukmasova).

Restorative and Transformative Justice

Restorative justice and transformative justice are two central decarceration strategies towards prison abolition, as they are based on "reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance" (A. Davis 107). By providing alternative forms of justice, these movements encourage us to not only imagine new ways of relating to one another, but also to actively challenge and dismantle the structures that reinforce the punitive justice system.

Philly Stands Up, a small collective working against sexual assault in various communities in Philadelphia, offers useful insights on the differences between restorative and transformative justice. They argue that transformative justice is similar to restorative justice, but is a bigger project which aims to address the systems of oppression that are at play within our communities and the world we live in. In a 2012 interview with *Organizing Upgrade*, the collective defined "restorative justice" as follows:

> Restorative justice, hinging on the word "restore," recognizes that punitive justice is insufficient and that when harm is done it affects the entire community (…) restorative justice's project is to restore a relationship to the way it was before harm was done. It works hard to include community in that and to do that in a wide variety of different ways. Restorative justice, as we know it, has extremely

> strong and crucial roots in indigenous communities and practices. ("Furthering Transformative Justice")

The *Philly Stands Up* collective explains that transformative justice is similar to restorative justice in the sense that it works with a community and centers the survivor or victim's needs in their processes of accountability and reparation, but that "it doesn't actually want to restore things to the way they were; it wants to transform relationships" ("Furthering Transformative Justice"). Transformative justice approaches thus locate the roots of the harm or violence that has taken place in wider systems of oppressions such as racism, islamophobia, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism, and attempt to transform the relationships between the members of the community with these systems in mind.

Although the analysis of systemic and institutional oppression plays an important role in transformative justice approaches, the focus on the survivor or victim's needs and on the community aspect also remains central to their process, as members from projects such as *INCITE!, Sista II Sista* and *Critical Resistance* explain: "We examined the links between our multiple communities and confronted harms that could not always be attributed to the 'other'"(Kimi, Mimi & al., 4). Simultaneously as they attempt to address the broader roots of violence, they also acknowledge that the harm still takes place within their communities and that concrete steps towards accountability and reparations need to happen. Scholar and activist Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo further explains that "as we practice it, we are reminded that we are all implicated in the violence that occurs in our communities" (78).

Both restorative and transformative justice movements center the victim or survivor's needs in their process of community accountability. Rojas Durazos explains that "in the criminal process, a crime is construed as having been committed by an individual against the state (the

plaintiff). In that equation, survivors of violence are effaced, relegated to the position of observer in a process handled by professionals" (78), hence the criminal justice system in which we currently live in "usurps potential healing by stripping from the survivor the power to set goals and determine what justice should look like" (78). Restorative and transformative justice thus bring quite a drastic change by centering the victim or survivor in their processes towards accountability, reparation, and transformation.

They also stress the importance of community involvement, believing that involvement from the community strengthens the possibility for accountability as involving the aggressor's friends, family or people close to them makes it harder for the perpetrator or aggressor to evade the community accountability process and "may compel the aggressor's community to critically reflect on their own values and cultural norms that may be supporting people to violate others" (Bierra & al. 68). The involvement of community thus not only strengthens their chances to have the aggressor or perpetrator take accountability and helps to prevent the group engaging in the community accountability process from burning out, but also helps to transform the community by bringing everyone to understand their involvement in different forms of oppression. As I will further explore in the methodologies chapter, this is something that we often discussed and came back to as a group during the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop and it brought us to many realizations around the importance of empathy, which then became a central element in the film we created.

Shaping Change: *INCITE!*

One of the most influential projects in the transformative justice movement in North America is that of *INCITE!*, a community group at the origin of "The Color of Volence: Violence Against

Women of Color", a ground-breaking conference held at the University of California that sparked massive discussions on the topic of sexual violence against women of color back in 2000 (Richie & al. 2). The collective is composed solely of women of color and works towards breaking the silence around sexual violence with the aim of building accountability in their communities (Richie & al. 1). They came together as a strong voice against the mostly white middle-class antiviolence movement that was monopolizing the dialogue around sexual assault until the early 2000s in the United States, stressing the "importance of transcending the 'politics of inclusion' to actually address the concerns of women of color" (3). Instead of a social justice movement that centers the voices and needs of white-middle class women but opens up their structure to "include" the voices of women of colour, *INCITE!* argues that it is crucial "to place women of color at the center of the analysis of and the organization against domestic violence" (4) and that the solutions and movements that women of colour will come up with will benefit all women's liberation, as they will not only address personal and domestic harm, but also the root causes of domestic and sexual violence in systems of power and oppression.

They explain that it is through an intersectional approach that the importance of transformative justice becomes apparent, as "by constantly shifting the center to communities that face intersecting forms of oppression, we gain a more comprehensive view of the strategies needed to end all forms of violence" and "the importance of addressing state violence becomes evident" (4). While *INCITE!* engages in the creation of important dialogues between different communities of women of colour and their movements against violence, they also put their politics into action through their various chapters and working groups, the free resources they offer and their campaigns that support survivors of sexual or domestic stuck in legal battles against their oppressor. On their website, they not only offer their own free toolkit to "stop law

enforcement violence against women of color and trans people of color" (*Incite-National*), but they also provide links to many other toolkits created by other organizations such as the Creative Interventions Toolkit: "A Practical Guide to Stopping Interpersonal Violence". By offering a list of possible strategies that cover such a wide range of different approaches that some become contradictory with each other, *INCITE!* promotes critical dialogue and engagement in community accountability processes. They strongly believe that every situation is different from the other and that it is important to always remain critically engaged with the interpersonal and structural systems that are at play.

The *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* project directly draws from the *INCITE!* legacy, centering women and queer people of color in the discussions, organizing and making of the film. As the initiator of the project and a white queer woman of European settler descent, it is crucial for me to critically engage with my position as an ally in transformative justice movements and more specifically in this project. While the project was made in collaboration with a majority of women of color, I still constantly addressed my positionality during the production of the film and we had ongoing discussions about intersectionality. In the methodologies chapter, I further discuss my critical approach to hierarchical structures in filmmaking and address the ways in which I navigated my positionality.

Stronger Communities

While restorative and transformative justice movements offer important decarceration tactics from which this project is inspired by, many of these initiatives share the understanding that some of their approaches are limited by the fact that they rely on an idealized notion of community that does not always exist in practice (Richie & al. 8). This realization also came up a

few times during the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop discussions. *INCITE!* further explains their perspective on the matter:

> In the absence of this ideal community, there is no guarantee that restorative justice measures will actually hold perpetrators of gender violence accountable. Consequently, many survivors find themselves further victimized by these strategies, as they are often pressured by community members to "reconcile" with the offender with little regard to their safety or need for justice and accountability. (Richie & al. 8)

Activist Connie Burk adds to that point by emphasizing that "our activist communities do not presently have the skills, shared values, and cultural touchstones in place to sustain Community Accountability efforts" (272), which can sometimes lead to unfortunate instances which may replicate the legal system's "re-victimization of the survivor" (272). *INCITE!* explains that it is therefore important to address harm existing within communities in order to build stronger communities and that we should also seek alternatives for those who do not already exist within communities who can support them.

I personally believe that film can be a powerful way to explore and figure out what the communities we aspire to create could look like. As a filmmaker, I am really inspired by collective approaches to filmmaking as it allows me to engage in critical discussions with others and creatively explore what kind of communities we would like to bring to life. Film, more specifically, allows us to not only engage with each other on an intellectual level around these visions, but also to enact them, figure out what they look like and feel like, and share them with audiences, and I believe that this, in itself, can be incredibly transformative. I also believe that film and other media can create shifts in culture, and therefore the visions that are created can

slowly come to manifest in our lived reality. However, it is important to recognize that while filmmaking and other arts can be aimed towards creating social change, they do not erase the current difficulties that communities are facing in their attempts to create sustainable transformative justice possibilities.

Inside/Outside the System

Another current shortcoming of transformative and restorative justice movements brought up by some activists regards the lack of alternatives to calling the police. Connie Burk argues that "Community Accountability as a rejection of the criminal legal system and as a test of realness creates the false idea that we can eliminate the harms of the criminal legal system" (269) by trying "to replicate the helpful functions of law enforcement (interrupting harmful acts) and prosecution (determining responsibility for and redressing harm), but outside the framework of the State" (270). Burk thus perceives that community processes that aim to hold someone accountable for the harm that they have done share the same intentions as those the punitive justice system claims to have. However, this criticism opposes quite strongly the calls to not call the police made by groups such as *INCITE!* and *CARA (Communities Against Rape and Abuse)* and does not take into account that "for many communities, going to the cops is not an option; many have experienced harm at the hands of law enforcement" (Rojas Durazo 77). Rojas Durazo further explains that "to many women of color, as well as to migrant, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people of color and their communities, the semiotic resonance between violence and cops echoes as police brutality, sexual violation, deportation, incarceration, and labor exploitation" (77).

Rojas Durazo's argument is echoed by *INCITE!* organizers who explain that "the criminal justice system has always been brutally oppressive toward communities of color, including women of color" and that the response strategy "often engaged by communities of color to address state violence is advocating that women keep silent about sexual and domestic violence to maintain a united front against racism" (Richie & al. 2). *INCITE!* thus describes that "the challenge women of color face in combatting personal *and* state violence is to develop strategies for ending violence that *do* assure safety for survivors of sexual/domestic violence and *do not* strengthen our oppressive criminal justice apparatus" (2). However, as Mariame Kaba argues, there is currently a lack of options when it comes to alternatives to calling the police: "The options when harm comes to you in this country are what? Call the police and get somebody from the outside involved in your process, or figure it out on your own. Doing nothing is not a good option for a lot of people . . . you shouldn't have to choose between going to the state or doing nothing" (qtd. in Dukmasova). The question of whether or not to call the police is an ongoing debate within transformative justice movements.

Furthermore, state violence is not only limited to the police, the court and the prison, but according to many grassroots organizations it is also often replicated in non-profit organizations which work in collaboration with the state. An example brought up by *INCITE!* is the ways in which "rape crisis centers and shelters increasingly rely on state and federal sources for their funding (…) working *with* the state rather than working *against* state violence" (Richie & al. 1). These rape crisis centers and shelters "police women in a manner similar to the criminal justice system, and (…) the system particularly victimizes women who are already criminalized, such as sex workers and transgendered people" (Richie & al. 8).

In the late twentieth century in the United States, there was a general movement where victims of sexual violence "increasingly turned to nonprofits, professionals, and the police" (Kimi & al. 3). What then happened, according to transformative justice groups, is that "nonprofit service provision (…) narrowly focused on state-imposed reporting schemes that robbed us of the sense of freedom and creativity needed to develop and implement interventions against domestic and state sexual violence" (Kimi & al. 3). This call for the importance of creativity is echoed by Rojas Durazo who argues that the "reliance upon criminal justice responses seizes our creativity and the possibility of achieving profound social transformation at the roots of violence" (78)

As Sawatsky points out, when "restorative justice initiatives are institutionalized as mechanisms of crime control" and use 'alternative' processes "within the imagination and framework of the existing culture", they do not challenge the underlying logic of the violence but rather "entrenches the status quo" (18). By working with the state, non-profit organizations therefore not only limit their agency and creative scope, but also fail to address systemic and institutional forms of violence and instead perpetuate violence against women of colour and trans people, as Rojas Durazo eloquently explains:

> When the state enters the frame as an ally of the antiviolence movement, the omnipresence of violence is disregarded, allowing the state to evade scrutiny and accountability for its role in orchestrating and deploying countless forms of violence against Latinas, women of color, migrants, queer, and trans folks. (81)

By allying with the state, these non-profit organizations become incompatible with the crucial goal of transformative justice which is to address the systemic and institutional roots of violence and harm in order to bring healing and transform communities.

Academia and Incarceration

The *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* project occupies a truly paradoxical position by its entanglement with academia as it was realized within the context of my master's degree. Although the workshop and film we created had clear prison abolitionist aims, our positionality within academia was something that we had to address in concrete ways especially due to the fact that academia's involvement with the prison industrial complex and its ideology reaches far beyond that of non-profit alternative justice organizations' complicity with the state.

Academia's material investment in prisons, as activist Bella Week points out, ranges from universities having "historically relied on prison labor to produce desks and chairs for classrooms" to their ongoing "financial investments into hedge funds that sustain and expand private prisons". In North American culture, Eli Meyerhoff explains that "figures of the citizen, the worker, and the graduate are contrasted with the deviant, the criminal, and the dropout". Prisons and universities, for Meyerhoff, therefore "complement each other as two sides of the same coin". Week additionally argues that "both the university and the prison seem to be in the business of producing knowledge about human worth". Paying tuition, according to Week, is justified by a belief that "our social value increases with a university education". If studying is seen as an investment that will have its outcome through an increased social value, it is also true for the opposite side of the coin; the value of those who are not a product of academia and who are not investing in its ideology are then seen as "less valuable" (Week), therefore more easily disposable. Week goes on to emphasize that the university:

> …reproduces an existing hierarchy of human value that marks populations as disposable (…) produces the valuable subjects that the prison then purports to

> protect; and (…) is the power that gets embodied by individual actors within the legal system to ultimately declare who becomes a prisoner.

Thus, it is through academic recognition that the people in the courtroom and those governing the prison obtain their power and produce a prisoner. As Week puts it; "it is the university—speaking through the judge—that makes that sentence real." This value system perpetrated by academia is something that we specifically attempted to resist through the ways in which we approached the exchange of knowledge within the workshop, finding alternatives to identifying ourselves by our credentials to instead prioritize each other's interests and experiences that may fall outside of that system.

In fact, one of the ways in which Week perceives it is possible to subvert academia's ideological investment in prisons is through active resistance, as she explains: "Resisting the devaluation of others means we must resist seeing our own worth as being tied to our education". Week further argues that this may also mean "devaluing our own voices" to instead prioritize and support the voices of prisoners and those most directly affected by the prison system, which is what I am hoping to do in this project, by providing space and resources within the university structures for transformative justice activists already involved in prison abolition to co-create a science fiction film together.

I believe that while it is crucial to resist and fight the prison system from the outside, it is important to also do this work within the institutions we are participating in and benefitting from that support and maintain the systems that we are hoping to subvert. We therefore created a film with the intent to share it with audiences beyond the walls of the university with the desire that it would be as accessible as possible to larger audiences.

It is also important to recognize that activist work in relation to prison abolition rarely ever operates completely outside the systems that are involved in maintaining the prisons, as in order to provide direct support to incarcerated people, these initiatives need to navigate the complex systems through which these individuals are deeply monitored and policed. Despite these limitations, I truly believe that it is important to keep working towards prison abolition and attempting to subvert as much as we can any system that invests ideologically and materially in the prison industrial complex.

Chapter 3: Science Fiction and Social Change

Science fiction, as a literary and cinematic genre, has a long history of critically engaging with social issues and attempting to instigate political and social change. Both cultural theorist Raymond Williams and activist and author Walidah Imarisha believe that science fiction's particular power is not only due to its ability to promote the imagination of limitless futures, but should in fact be attributed to its capacity to "question, challenge, and re-envision everything all at once" (Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future"). Imarisha continues to explain that **"**we are not fighting a single-issue oppression system—we are fighting a white supremacist hetero-patriarchal capitalist system (word up to bell hooks)—so our response must be holistic and all-encompassing" ("Rewriting the future"). Williams' vision further strengthens this argument, as he explains: "part of the power of science fiction is that it is always potentially a mode of authentic shift: a crisis of exposure which produces a crisis of possibility; a reworking, in imagination, of *all* forms and conditions" (109).

While much of mainstream science fiction projects colonialist tropes into space, repeating the myths of "the Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land, whether actually empty or filled with those Others" (Langer 3), there is an important collection works that challenge such tropes. Anti-colonial science fiction enables readers to shift lenses. Langer argues that powerful anti-colonial science fiction does not avoid the "twin myths" of colonialist science fiction (that of the Other and that of the Strange Land), but rather "hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain" in such a way that "their very power, their situation at the centre of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back in on itself" (4). Indigenous futurism and Afrofuturism are two genres that specifically do the work of dismantling these oppressive ideologies and proposing alternative visions for social change.

Similarly, feminist and anti-racist science fiction works employ different techniques to expose some of the other harmful myths perpetuated in generic science fiction with the aims of turning their power back on itself.

Visionary Fiction

As I previously mentioned, the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* project is inspired by what adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha coined as 'visionary fiction' (Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future"). Following their legacy, I believe that while science fiction has the ability to create change in the real world by critically engaging with socio-political issues, political change also needs to be instigated tangibly and that one needs to move beyond the literature in order to initiate that change. Imarisha explains that "Visionary fiction offers social justice movements a process to explore creating those new worlds (although not a solution—that's where sustained mass community organizing comes in)". Hence, coming from an activist background, Imarisha argues that while the theoretical and creative explorations are necessary tools that can serve as an opening of the minds, we need to put the re-imagined futures into practice. As a black woman in the United States, she refers to her own experience as an example of the potential outcomes of taking these actions: **"**We know that we are living science fiction. We are the dreams of enslaved Black folks, who were told it was "unrealistic" to imagine a day when they were not called property". (Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future")

The reason I am inspired by science fiction is exactly this: it holds incredible power in its ability to re-envision entire worlds and social formations all at once and it is a powerful source for the opening of minds. Science fiction's generic history of colonial tales does not stand in the way of its capacity to challenge taken for granted oppressive systems of power, as decolonial,

feminist and anti-racist science fiction has all that it takes for activists to create worlds in which they can dismantle system of powers, challenge the image of the alien "Other" (which in the context of prison abolition we can understand as both racialized and criminalized) and imagine new forms of living together, through solidarity and enabling each other's capacity for healing and accountability.

Science Fiction and Prison Abolition

I am specifically interested in the ways in which science fiction has the ability to defamiliarize us with incarceration, which is so often portrayed as an "inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives" (A. Davis 9). Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy are three influential examples of feminist science fiction that propose alternative systems of justice, while two recently published anthologies; *So Long Been Dreaming: Post-Colonial Science Fiction and Fantasy,* and *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* share stories that creatively critique the prison system.

While some of these dystopian science fiction narratives, such as the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, extrapolate from reality to create images of "carceral inner cities" (Foucault 223) that echo Foucault's panopticism, others, like *Woman on the Edge of Time,* propose visions of future societies that function without prisons. Many works of science fiction, like those present in the *So Long Been Dreaming* and *Octavia's Brood* anthologies, disrupt dystopian and utopian dichotomies, blending elements from both genres and offering complex visions of justice in the future. I am also particularly inspired by Larissa Sansour's film trilogy: *A Space Exodus* (2009), *Nation Estate* (2012) and *They Ate From the Finest Porcelain* (2016), which explores Palestinian

futures through science fiction, Skawennati's multimedia explorations of indigenous futures on Turtle Island, and Alex Rivera's film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) that re-imagines the U.S. / Mexico border through science fictional disembodiment possibilities.

Through storytelling, these science fiction works and others create worlds that deal with justice differently, imagining ways for communities to hold themselves accountable for "crimes the current criminal justice system does not even have language for… gentrification, displacement, economic devastation, generational institutionalized oppression" (Imarisha, "Imagine a World Without Prisons", 4) and I would further add, in the context of Sansour, Skawennati and Rivera's films, border imperialism. By using creative writing and imagining, science fiction engaged in transformative justice beautifully embodies James Baldwin's creative motivation:

> You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world… The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it. *(*Baldwin qtd. in Romano)

This legacy of visionary fiction and transformative justice activism is what this project is drawing from and hopes to contribute to.

Chapter 4: Methodologies

Emergent Strategy

As I was beginning to conceptualize the ideas for the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* project, visionary fiction author and activist adrienne maree brown, launched her new book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Reading this book was life-changing as it brought so many felt and intuitive elements of my approach to collective creativity into words while also suggesting new strategies. Initially, I thought I would make a film about *Emergent Strategy* with brown and I worked on it for several months. Later, I realized that a workshop in my own community through which I apply her methods might be a more feasible project for my masters. I was curious as to what the application of the tools and strategies offered by the book would lead to in relation to collective filmmaking organizing and I decided that this project was the perfect opportunity to experiment with it. The book also resonated for me in the preparation of the workshop as it offers tangible tools for facilitation - and while this project was not the first in which I brought different inspiring people together to create a film, it was the first time that I was to host and facilitate such a workshop.

Emergent Strategy strongly informed and shaped my research-creation project both in its form and in its content as I sought to create, through the creative relationship with the workshop participants and the final science fiction film, possibilities for transformative justice that centered change and healing.

Inspired by the potential for social change through science fiction, brown draws from the work of Octavia Butler and proposes to inform our social justice movements from patterns and movements found in nature. She most directly draws from some of the "Earthseed" verses in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1999), such as:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change. (Butler 3)

brown therefore developed the elements and principles of *Emergent Strategy* by building from the idea that everything around us is always in constant change. Through that framework, brown understands activism as striving towards "shaping change" (brown 1). Describing emergent strategies as "ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions" (brown 20), brown developed different principles that explore how the ways we relate to ourselves and to others have a broader impact on our social justice movements and the world.

The principles for emergent strategy brought forward by brown are offerings; one is invited to read the book in the order that pleases them and to take and leave what they desire from it. The same applies to the tools that she offers; the reader should decide for themselves how they choose to interpret and apply them (brown 8).

In order to understand how the workshop was organized, it is therefore important to understand *Emergent Strategy.* While it is beyond the reach of this paper to explain *Emergent Strategy* in its entirety, I will at least offer some insights into four of the principles that had the most influence on the organization of this project:

Fractal: The relationship between small and large

Adaptative: How we change

Interdependence and Decentralization: Who we are and how we share

Resilience and Transformative justice: How we recover and transform

(brown 50)

1 - Fractals

To begin with the first element, the concept of the fractal had a huge impact on my approach to the workshop. Drawing from micro-to-macro patterns found in nature, such as those found in cauliflower, ferns, dandelions, the veins in the human body and even in "the prevalence of the spiral in the universe – the shape in the prints of our fingertips echoes into geological patterns, all the way to the shape of the galaxies" (51), brown argues that we have much to learn from these fractals in our activist movements. She explains that "what we practice at the small scale sets patterns for the whole system" (53), therefore arguing that the very small ways in which we relate to each other is reflected on a broader scale. She argues that we need to resolve and address issues within our own activist movements (53) so that we can achieve true meaningful and deep changes within the oppressive systems that we aim to change. This concept had an important influence on my approach to the workshop as it brought to light the power of the moment of gathering itself. It made me realize the importance of the process not only in the context of creative research concerning how science fiction can help us envision worlds without prisons, but also in the context of the relationships that were to be formed. However we would relate and create with one another would manifest in some kind of way through the science fiction film we would make together as well as in our lives and in our other organizing. It

therefore became really important for me to create a space that would allow for these relationships to grow in ways that would be natural for them and would encourage our creativity.

2 – Intentional Adaptation

Intentional adaptation, or the "adaptative" element, draws directly from Octavia Butler's "Earthseeds" verses. brown explains that as we will inevitably face constant change in the world we live in, it is important to intentionally adapt to it (67). She describes this process as "changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing" (70). brown further extends this process of intentional adaptation to one that may be undertaken as a group, thus highlighting the importance of having a clear shared vision as a group, which is also a step on the path towards decentralization (70). Intentional adaptation proved itself to be extremely relevant in the organizing of the schedule of the workshop and while confronting the many challenges that came up in the filming process.

When preparing for the workshop, I made sure to check in with everyone as to what they were interested in and hoping to get from the experience. I then created a very open schedule that we often, as a group, decided to shift around, whether to allow for someone to step up to lead a discussion or to change the timing of the exercises and discussions in relation to our energy levels.

I also focused on intentional adaptation during the making of the film. While we initially made a plan in which I would gather all the ideas we shared in the brainstorming session and send everyone an email with a proposal for a script a week after the workshop, everyone's capacities changed after the workshop. We shifted the collaboration according to people's

capacities and we approached the making of the film less like a structured production plan but more as an emergent process.

3 – Interdependence and Decentralization

Learning from the paths and movements of collaboration and connection found in nature, such as the intertwined root systems of the oak, birch, ash and mangrove trees, the communication of mycelium, as well as flocks of birds and swarms of insects (brown 85), *Emergent Strategy* advocates for "more interdependence – mutual reliance and shared leadership" as well as the decentralization of activist organizing. This position is however quite nuanced as brown herself doesn't identify as anti-hierarchical (8) per say, instead arguing for the benefits of "micro-hierarchies in a collaborative environment" (9).

My personal approach on this topic is that while I strive to be involved in as much anti-hierarchical organizing as possible, it sometimes becomes difficult in the context of certain film projects. As this particular project took place not only within the timeframe, resources and structures of academia, but also within the structures of my own master's, I realized that avoiding hierarchies all together would be impossible. However, I still approached hierarchies in a critical way and with as much transparency as possible, allowing for open discussions regarding the different hierarchical aspects and power relations at play within the project (from my instigation of the project and its implications within academia to the use of cameras, etc.). I will explore the ways in which I navigated hierarchies in more detail later as I describe the making of the film.

4 – Resilience and Transformative Justice

For the 'resilience and transformative justice' element, brown builds on many of the ideas discussed in my earlier Chapter 1: Prison Abolition and Transformative Justice. She more specifically approaches this topic in relation to the transformative ways that we can learn from pain. Brown refers to the *Merriam-Webster* description of resilience as: "The ability to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens. The ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, bent, etc. An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change." (Merriam-Webster) as well as to writer Corina Fadel's "the way the water knows just how to flow, not force itself around a river rock; then surely I can stretch myself in the shape my own path is asking of me" (qtd. in brown 123). Both of these descriptions of resilience truly speak to the work that participants of the workshop and I do in relation to prison abolition, anti-border organizing, migrant solidarity and transformative justice. Each of our positionalities, as people directly affected by these systems to different extents, shows resilience through the ways in which we fight against the structures that oppress those around us and ourselves.

PART 1: SHAPING THE WORKSHOP

Choosing the Participants

Building from something that has always personally felt important in previous film projects, I wanted to bring together activists and artists who would inspire each other and whose work would complement or intertwine with one another from different perspectives. This intention resonates directly with brown's advice to "invite the right people" (brown 216). She proposes facilitators to ask themselves the following questions when creating an invitation list: "Who is

directly impacted by this issue?"; "Who is doing compelling work on this issue?"; and "Who can move this work forward?" (216).

I therefore collaborated with Anniessa Antar, Bae Laurel O'Connor and Lolo Sirois, three artists and activists with whom I previously collaborated on *Swarm of Selenium* and who had shown active interest in the project from the moment that I began meditating on the idea. These three incredible artists helped with the organizing of the workshop, and while we initially intended for all of them to be able to attend the workshop, different circumstances made it so that, no matter our efforts, Anniessa was going to be in Paris and Bae in Oakland at the time of the workshop. I personally hesitated about moving forward with the workshop due to their inability to attend, but they both strongly encouraged me to continue. We all agreed that this workshop felt more like the beginning of a longer project to come than an end in itself. We also talked about the importance of framing it within the context of my master's and to see it as an opportunity to begin exploring our ideas within the limits and timeframe of my degree. Both Anniessa and Bae however continued to have important roles in the organization of the workshop, from the idea's emergence in Spring of 2017 until the workshop took place in November.

Asking ourselves brown's questions, we found it useful to come up with a list of different activist movements whose work aligns with the broader movement for prison abolition. While we were aware and critical of the fact that it was beyond the reach of this project to possibly gather every perspective from the prison abolitionist movement and that narrowing down various activist approaches to a few categories wouldn't do justice to the different intersections and complexities of these movements, this exercise was still quite useful to us. This exercise helped us to accept, from the very beginning, that this project had its own limitations and it reminded us

that this was only the inception of a bigger creative undertaking. Here are the 5 movements we listed:

1. Transformative Justice
2. Prison abolition
3. Migrant Justice / Anti-Border imperialism
4. Anti-gentrification
5. Indigenous Sovereignty

For each of them, we came up with a few different activist organizations, groups or individuals based in Montreal or Toronto. Out of respect for them, I will maintain the anonymity of all those who didn't participate in the project. Hoping to have between 5 and 10 participants, we contacted the different groups and individuals by email with a proposal to attend a 2-day workshop on the topic of science fiction and prison abolition. While we didn't receive any answer from some, others were interested in the project but couldn't attend the workshop in November and we discussed the possibility of future collaborations.

The 7 participants who confirmed their presence were Lolo Sirois, one of the initial collaborators on the project who is a printmaker, designer and activist; Nikki Shaffeeullah, a facilitator, director, performer and artist whose work focuses on prison abolition, theatre and the creative empowerment of marginalized communities; Romina Hernández, a migrant justice activist who organizes as part of Solidarity Across Borders and the anti-gentrification group P.O.P.I.R; Amina Mohamed, an anti-oppression facilitator and community organizer; Ruthie Titus, an activist and filmmaker; Ariane Lorrain, a documentary filmmaker and cinematographer; as well as a seventh person who is an activist and art curator and who was unable to attend the workshop at the last minute.

An important lack of this project is that no one from the "Indigenous Sovereignty" perspective was able to participate in the workshop. It is crucial for all of the co-organizers as I, as we continue to do prison abolition and science fiction work on unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory, to change the ways in which we organize to center Indigenous activists in the visioning of these futures. This is something that we discussed in depth and hope to shift in projects to come.

Forming the Agenda

Following a collaborative approach and the *Emergent Strategy* principles, I wanted the workshop to be co-organized and co-facilitated by the participants. As it was hard to collectively decide on the schedule of the workshop from a distance due to a lack of time and resources, I first asked each confirmed participant whether they would like to guide a discussion or activity of their choice on a topic relating to prison abolition and science fiction.

Nikki Shaffeeullah responded that she would be interested in hosting an activity in relation to theater and transformative futures, Ariane Lorrain proposed to co-organize a discussion around some film excerpts with me, Lolo Sirois offered to lead an activity around design and futures, and the seventh participant was interested in leading a discussion on art and prison abolition. The other participants showed interest in the possibility of guiding discussions or activities but chose to simply attend the workshop.

One of the *Emergent Strategy* facilitation tools is that of creating "a living agenda" (brown 217). brown, who has a lot of experience in workshop facilitation and in activist spaces, explains that organizers have a general tendency "to make use of the precious in-person time of a meeting by filling up every minute, from the beginning to the end of the day, with formal session

time, creating schedules that are hard to change when new information comes along." (217) She therefore advises facilitators to "develop a spacious, adaptable agenda so the participants can shape the meeting." (217) This advice proved extremely helpful in the creation of the agenda and in its capacity to adapt to any challenges that came up. It also allowed us to re-shape the agenda collectively as we found inspiring moments we wanted to allow more space for, or when the energy of the group dropped. In collaboration with Lolo Sirois, Anniessa Antar and Bae Laurel O'Connor, I drafted the agenda based on the participants' interests (see Appendix).

Choosing the Space

As a filmmaker and a queer feminist activist, I am sensitive to the importance of space. I am conscious of the aesthetics of space and the meanings that are conveyed onto the screen. To choose the space in which we ended up hosting the workshop, the co-organizers and I first checked in with all of the participants' accessibility needs. It was Lolo who came up with the idea of hosting the workshop at the Concordia University Greenhouse. The Greenhouse, located on the top floor of Concordia's Hall Building, is a space full of plants and natural light, with a surreal contrasting view of downtown Montreal. All of the co-organizers agreed that the Greenhouse could provide a supportive and uplifting environment to discuss such a heavy topic as prison abolition, so we booked the space for November 18th and 19th 2017. As it is also important to keep creative minds and bodies well nourished, we collaborated with *La Plottée Food Collective* who provided snacks, lunch and take-away dinners for all workshop participants.

The simple fact that everyone participating in this project was willing to commit 2 entire days to gather and create together felt so precious in itself. As Romina Hernández pointed out in

the workshop; as activists, we are so often drained from surviving under capitalism and the other oppressive systems that we collectively face (such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, ableism, etc.) as well as the unpaid volunteer activism that we do towards fighting those systems, that we most often operate from a reactive place of emergency in our activism. Romina further explained that having spaces where there is time to simply check in with ourselves and each other and be in touch with how we feel is extremely rare in the activist spaces that she knows. For her, this is what made the workshop feel really nourishing. Amina Mohamed also added that the workshop reminded her of reflective and creative spaces from her time in university and that it was something that was missing in her activist work since. It became really clear to me then that creating a space for gathering was not only a matter of time and place, but also of emotionally creating space for each other.

Filming the Workshop

In the recent years, activist communities in the United States and Canada have organized many science fiction workshops oriented towards social justice. The workshops organized by the *Wildseeds Collective* in New Orleans, the *Prisoners Correspondence Project* in Montreal, as well as adrienne maree brown's "Direct Action and Sci Fi", "Ferguson is the Future" and "Octavia Butler Emergent Strategy Training Sessions" that took place across the United States, are just some examples of the numerous workshops created with the aims of bringing science fiction and activism together. Unfortunately, while these workshops influenced many of the activist science fiction works I am inspired by, none of them were documented in a way that has been made accessible. This is partly why I found it important to film and document the science fiction and prison abolition workshop I organized. It is also important to note that the majority of

these previous workshops were more oriented towards literary science fiction than film. As I previously mentioned, I am personally particularly interested and invested in the creative possibilities that the film medium offers to envision and create future and alternate worlds.

Thus, we filmed the workshop with the intent to blend parts of its documentation with the fictional film we would create. However, as the project evolved, we collectively made the decision that the film was more compelling as a science fiction comedy that immersed the viewers in this imaginary world rather than remind the audience of the process of creation. The final version of the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* film is therefore a science fiction piece on its own that does not incorporate footage from the workshop. However, the participants and I kept all of the video footage from the workshop and we are discussing future possibilities of what could be done with the footage beyond this academic project. The video documentation of the workshop has therefore turned into a future project to be explored.

PART 2: LIVING THE WORKSHOP

Before the workshop started, the seventh participant contacted me to tell me that they might be unable to attend the workshop. We decided to keep in touch throughout the day to see whether they could make it for the discussion they were supposed to lead, but they asked us to begin the workshop without them.

Creating an Opening

We started the day by gathering, coffee and tea in hand, in a circle in one of the rooms of the Greenhouse. As the camera operator Ruthie Titus and sound technician Anna Pringle were

setting up, we announced to everyone that we were not going to film the first part of the workshop but only record the sound until we could check in about it and go through the consent technicalities. This way, we would have time to first introduce ourselves to each other without the pressure of being recorded on camera.

Although I had planned to ask if anyone needed translation, I completely forgot in the moment as I admittedly was a bit nervous at the beginning of the workshop. It eventually came up shortly after and we re-adjusted our speaking pace, collectively determined a gesture that could be used if someone needed to slow down the pace at which they spoke, and we changed our sitting positions to allow for whisper translation to occur when needed. This is something that adrienne maree brown also brings up as "individual participant articulation" (brown 217), explaining that language barriers exist both in the literal and cultural realm. In terms of cultural barriers, this is something that we collectively addressed as they came up, giving room for people to express when they didn't know about a cultural concept or object.

Then, addressing both a personal discomfort and brown's tip to not "hover" (brown 220), I let everyone know that while I would speak a lot in the beginning of the workshop to guide us through the introductions, the consent forms and the agenda of the workshop, I was going to step back afterwards and others would take the lead. brown especially advices facilitators to "give the group time to be in its own process, conversation, or small group without your intervention. Be available if needed, but make room. This allows the group to actually problem solve together, develop relationships, and cultivate each other's leadership." (220) In this regard, I worked to make room for participants to take the lead not only in the discussion or activity they had organized, but also throughout the other discussions and activities that I brought up. For

example, one of the ways in which I did this was to sometimes pause and ask, "Does anyone want to offer an activity/idea or lead a discussion here?".

Before beginning with the topic of prison abolition, I also addressed the fact that this was a sensitive subject. While I didn't have any specific guidelines to offer as to how to do this, I told all participants that I hoped this would be a space where we could center self-care and collective care and that I wished everyone would feel comfortable stopping a discussion to address something that came up for them emotionally, leave the room if they needed to, or do anything else that felt necessary for them.

Then, again following brown's advice, I opened the workshop by setting the goal and the intention of our gathering (brown 215). I explained my motivations in leading the workshop, as well as my hopes and intentions, and I shared that I was really excited to hear about everyone else's desires and goals for the workshop.

Collective Introductions

I generally feel like introducing ourselves by our names, titles and credentials does not truly convey who we are and rather perpetuates the academic valuing structures that I addressed earlier. I therefore chose to begin the workshop by guiding all the participants through an exercise with the hopes of challenging the limitations of formal introductions. Borrowing Jackie Wang's exercise, which she says to have herself learned from Dante Berry (Wang, 01:28:42-01:30:05), I asked everyone to close their eyes and imagine a space in which they feel safe. I then guided them through a visual meditation and eventually brought them back to open their eyes. I then asked if there were any police in their safe space. Everyone broke out in laughter and Nikki Shaffeeullah exclaimed "This is both a visualization exercise and a joke!" (Mohamed &

al.). The obvious answer to the question was a collective no and we used this opportunity to begin our dismantling of the prison ideology. I then asked everyone to introduce themselves by sharing their names and pronouns, what they hoped to get out of the workshop, and to name one element from their visualization. This exercise was really exciting as we had the chance to hear about the huge variety between everyone's safe-space visualizations and it helped us to creatively engage with our imagination from the very beginning of the workshop.

Consent

We then went through the consent forms which asked the participants to agree to the following statement:

> I UNDERSTAND THAT I (PARTICIPANTS) AM CONSENTING THAT MY IMAGE AND VOICE BE USED FOR THE "WORLDS WITHOUT PRISONS: EMERGING VISIONS IN SCIENCE FICTION" FILM AND THAT ANY FOOTAGE RECORDED DURING THE WORKSHOP MAY BE USED.

I explained to the participants that the reason for such a statement was to make the recording and editing of the footage easier, as it might be impossible to completely remove someone from all the material as we were filmed as a group. We however verbally agreed that I would show them both our collectively created science fiction film as well as any film that used the footage we recorded from the workshop during different stages of editing so that they would be able to give me feedback if they desired. I promised that I would do the best that I could to respect them and make a film they would feel good about. I also asked if anyone had boundaries in terms of what we could record. A participant (whose anonymity I will maintain) explained that they were in a delicate situation as one of their close ones was currently incarcerated while awaiting trial. She

said that she was not going to censor herself during the workshop, but asked Ruthie Titus and Anna Pringle to stop recording if ever the conversation came up. They both agreed and we proceeded to finish the consent forms and technicalities conversation.

PART 3: WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS

The activities and discussions we led during the workshop truly helped us to get to know each other. We shared our concerns, interests and positionalities in relation to prison abolition and transformative justice and everyone was sincerely open to each other. The space we mutually created was one where we could both have politically engaged discussions and an emotional support to process our difficult feelings about incarceration.

Something that I noticed during the workshop is that some of the most enriching conversations happened organically, falling in-between the lines of the agenda, and resonating with the adaptative element of *Emergent Strategy*. While it was important to create a structure for the agenda in order to have a timeline and a list of priorities for our convening, there are also shortcomings to dividing up the discussion topics within a schedule. What ended up happening naturally was that each topic would bleed into the other and conversations would sometimes circle back to a point we had shared earlier, especially when it felt like we had more insights to discuss further.

We also created a list of the things that resonated the most with the group, marking them on a big board that remained visible to all throughout the workshop, and we decided to lead our brainstorming session by drawing from these points.

Central Elements from the Workshop

One of the most important moments that we often came back to during the workshop was when Nikki Shaffeeullah shared that it was really difficult for her to ask herself the question "What could worlds without prisons look like?" and she remarked that she the preferred to ask, "What other forms could our need for accountability and safety take?" (Mohamed & al.). Amina Mohamed echoed Nikki's words and added that she finds it more productive to not only imagine futures where the oppressive systems that we know no longer exist, but more importantly to think of the paths that may lead us out of these systems. Both Nikki and Amina's points really resonated with the rest of the participants and influenced our brainstorming session.

Another element that became central to our discussion was "the need for empathy" (Mohamed & al.). The topic first came up when we were addressing our positionalities, as the participant whose close relative was recently incarcerated and I were talking about how we relate to doing prison abolition work while having family members on the opposite sides of the system. Being long-term friends, there is a lot of trust and compassion between the two of us and we openly engaged in that discussion with the other participants of the workshop. As a group, we began talking about the complexities that exist in relation to being at different intersections of the prison system and we attempted to pinpoint some of the things that can get in the way of accountability and transformative justice. We realized that sometimes pain makes it impossible for certain people to be willing or able to engage in discussions with those that have caused them harm, and even in some instances with the support network aiming to hold those that have caused harm accountable. From our personal experiences, each of us could relate to certain moments of being on either side of that dynamic, where relying on an established punitive system seemed less risky than engaging in a transformative justice process.

We also discussed the difficulties that we each experienced in being able to understand those that work within the prison system and the reasoning that brings them to think that they are doing a good thing by contributing to that violent system. We however all believed that it was crucial to keep working towards finding ways to shift these people's perspectives and hopefully get them to question their involvement in the system.

Another issue that we raised during the workshop, as other transformative justice activists have also pinpointed, was that often times, people lack strong communities to hold them accountable and help them feel safer. We also discussed how even in the context of people who are part of strong communities, sometimes shame can get in the way of their capacity to admit to their faults and they rather choose to avoid accountability.

During the brainstorming session, we therefore attempted to envision what science fiction film we could create that would help us explore paths that may lead us towards worlds without prisons and address the barriers that we outlined during the workshop in relation to creating safer and more accountable communities

On Cameras - Weapons of Surveillance

Ariane, who was going to be the cinematographer on the film, shared that she was feeling conflicted about how to use cameras, which are so often used as weapons of surveillance, to make a film for prison abolition. She asked if the other participants had ideas as to how we could subvert the use of cameras to oppose the ways in which cameras are often a tool of oppression and that prisoners are constantly under surveillance. Amina echoed Ariane's concerns, explaining that camera footage is also often used as evidence to criminalize people, and proposed the idea of taking state footage to repurpose it. Nikki also proposed to look into using body

cameras or surveillance drones in a subversive way. Ariane agreed with that idea and added that it could be really powerful to use state footage about prisons against itself, in a prison abolition film context. We all agreed to search for archival footage of prisons instead of creating more visual material about them.

Brainstorming – Sharing Ideas to Make a Film

Before we began the brainstorming session, we tried to reduce the pressure that all of us felt to come up with a tangible script for a short film and instead we agreed to approach the brainstorming moment more like a means to begin sharing ideas. It was also important for us to not let the timeline and resources we had for the film limit our imagination. Therefore, we made the plan to have a creative and open brainstorming session, and after the workshop, I would do the work of sorting through and synthesizing the ideas into a more realistic short film proposition.

What we came up with was a vision for a feature film which would present a world where prisons continue to expand to a ridiculous point where everything ends up becoming a prison. In that world, surveillance technologies are also pushed to an extreme, becoming a central part of the prison system. Artificial intelligence is used everywhere and we see the introduction of prison drones; artificially intelligent drones that act as prison guards. On the outside, movements of resistance build and different revolutionaries ally together to break down the system in one tumultuous day: children whose parents work for the prison system organize to pull tricks on them in the morning so that they cannot make it to work (e.g. splash paint all over their clothes, cut off all of the buttons on their shirts, etc.) while other kids whose families are

incarcerated become hackers and take down the electronic systems of the prisons. Meanwhile, drones begin to develop empathy and they also join the prison abolition movement.

After this introduction, the film would show different glimpses of life after prisons came to be abolished. While Nikki and Amina were interested in creating a mundane and comedic scene of a family doing transformative justice processes around small harms, Romina was inspired to create a small piece about a kid who is fighting gentrification. Lolo, Ariane and I were listening to what the other participants were proposing and encouraging the development of their ideas.

Then, after we closed the brainstorming session, I asked all of the participants about their interest in being involved in this film project on a longer term and everyone responded positively. Everyone was truly excited to see this film come to life and wanted to participate in its creation. I then realized that my initial hopes to facilitate creative connections between all of the workshop participants were met in that everyone seemed inspired by each other and strongly wanted this project to continue. Some of the participants also wanted to find ways to expand the structures of the workshop so that it could happen again and other activists could participate. We told each other we would keep in touch to see how we could make this happen and I would send all of them a script proposal within the following week.

PART 4: MAKING THE FILM

A few days after the workshop, I looked through all of the notes I had taken and I re-watched the brainstorming session we had filmed. When thinking about everyone's desires to expand the project further, I came up with the idea of structuring our vision for a feature film in a way that would allow other activists to contribute their transformative justice visions. My proposal to the

other participants was to write the opening of the film together and set it up so that other activists involved in prison abolition could contribute their own scene within a post-prisons world. After pitching this idea and discussing it further with the participants, we came to the realization that everyone had over-estimated their capacities in their excitement.

We discussed more tangible ways to make this film happen and we looked into possible film funding the project might be eligible for in the future. I then did research as to what were the criteria for those grants and I shared the information with the participants. We came to the conclusion that a productive way to approach the making of this short film, with the limited resources and quick timeline we had, would be to film one element from the opening of the film that could:

a) Help us explore our collaborative filmmaking style and the aesthetic and mood of the film we would like to create together.
b) Act as a short that could eventually be transformed and used for the video pitch or trailer that most feature film granting bodies require.

Then the holidays arrived; Romina left for Mexico, Ariane had to step down from the film because she was involved in too many projects at once and Nikki was in an incredibly busy work period. I was mostly working on the synopsis with Lolo in Montreal and Amina over the phone for a few weeks when I realized that working with kid actors, developing compelling characters and creating a science fiction universe was realistically way beyond the 2 months production timeline we were faced with. We therefore decided to focus on the storyline of the prison drone who develops empathy and I filmed the New Year's Eve Noise Demonstration held annually in support of prisoners that took place outside a prison in Laval in case it could be used for the prison abolition revolution storyline.

It eventually became harder to collaborate due to the distance between Montreal and Toronto, and in late January of 2018, Lolo and I decided to travel to Toronto for a few days in order to collaborate with Amina and Nikki in person and shoot the film. We had two brainstorming sessions to develop the film treatment over the first two days that we were there.

We decided to explore with the film what we had outlined in the workshop as "the need to develop empathy" in a fun and simple way. The film would be a first-person narrative told from the perspective of a drone about how he came to join the prison abolition movement. The drone would come from a prison-military family background and he had grown up inside a prison. He always believed in the system as it was the only thing he had ever known, until one day he was policing the outside of the prison and he witnessed the New Year's Eve Noise Demonstration. He had a special connection with one of the protesters (played by Amina) that really affected him and he began questioning what he had always believed in, realizing that something truly needed to change. The film would be a mix of re-appropriated prison archival footage, documentary footage from the New Year's Eve Noise Demonstration and fictional scenes of the drone and Amina. We made a shooting schedule but we didn't write a script or make a shot list, preferring to improvise the scenes.

During the following 3 days, we filmed the fictional scenes with the drone and Amina and we recorded the narration with Nikki as the voice actor for the drone character. Lolo and I would take turns flying the drone or operating the camera. Then, upon our return in Montreal, I filmed the drone in a green screen studio; the last footage we needed. It turns out that the drone was incredibly hard to fly (both in the wind and inside the green screen studio) so we played with that when we recorded the narration and incorporated it into the drone's personality.

Then, I researched archival prison footage and found an incredible number of clips from the California Correctional Services that were copyrights free. Together with filmmaker Jadis Dumas, I edited the film into a 10-minute piece and Vjosana Shkurti, the sound designer from my latest film, did the sound editing and sound design.

Reflections on Anti-Hierarchical Organizing

As everyone's capacities ended up being more limited than they anticipated, we often had to shift the workload of the production around. I came to realize that there were inevitable power dynamics due to the fact that I initiated this project in the context of my master's degree and that I had economic resources to support my studies, therefore allowing me to commit my energy to this project on a full-time basis. The other participants were not students and had other full-time jobs or projects they were committed to. Their capacity to be involved in the making of the film was therefore much lower than mine. While our collaboration encouraged open communication and involvement based on people's interest, the fact that I had much more time to commit to the project than others and that I had the desire to keep up with the timing of my master's degree meant that I was often taking on a leading position, initiating conversations, preparing idea and script proposals, proposing film timelines and taking on other production elements. I was also the only one who was a trained filmmaker and knew how to use the camera we were using for the shoot, so it also created dynamics in which people had to rely on me in order to be able to film scenes. I would often, for example, prepare the settings of the camera and then show Lolo how to operate it once already set up. This strongly contrasted with my desire to use *Emergent Strategy*'s 'interdependence and decentralization' element in the project and my broader intention to employ a non-hierarchical filmmaking structure. I realized that the different

structures of the project did not provide the possibilities to facilitate the "mutual reliance and shared leadership" (brown 8) that I explained earlier and was striving to create.

I therefore decided to approach the issues I had with my own desires to engage in an anti-hierarchical film process by understanding my role more like that of a producer than a director. I helped with the production of the film and organized the resources to make it happen, but when it came to writing the script, building the character, choosing the sets and what archival material we would use, I would base every decision on collective discussions we had and ensure that what participants had brought up in the workshop was central to the making of the film.

Everyone involved in the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* project was really excited about the film that resulted from our collaboration. While we had intensive political and creative conversations about prison abolition and transformative justice during our workshop, it is quite interesting to see that the resulting film is one that explores these topics through humour and satire. We used comedy as a liberating way to portray the violence of incarceration and to explore new possibilities for empathy.

In terms of the filmmaking process itself, it seems like the workshop element was the occasion of convening and creating that generally felt the most enriching to the participants as it was also a moment at which everyone had more capacity in terms of time and energy. While it was admittedly truly fun to shoot the film in Toronto, it also happened on a tight schedule where all of the collaborators had to focus on other work between the scenes we were filming.

As anticipated, the film that resulted from the *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop feels like the early exploration of a longer project to come. Looking towards the future, the next step would be to ensure the sustainability of the project by seeking funding that could provide economic support to allow every collaborator to be able to engage in

the filmmaking process to the extent that they aspire to. Finally, this filmmaking project was an inspiring creative process and an important learning experience in terms of possibilities for collective filmmaking approaches.

Conclusion

> Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. (…) We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. (Le Guin, Speech at National Book Awards)

Following Ursula K. Le Guin's passing away just three months ago, the acclaimed science fiction author's words weigh on the new generation of artists and writers who are left facing the magnitude of the work that remains to be done. As I write this thesis, the prison landscape in Canada and the United States is not showing any sign of brighter days; with racialized rates of incarceration on the rise (Paperny), indefinite detention of migrants receiving recent supports from the courts (Montanaro & al.) and the announcement of a new detention center to be built in Laval by 2020 (Champagne). While it might feel demoralizing to attempt to fight a system which seems to only keep getting stronger, Le Guin's words resonate in that any power constructed by humans can also be dismantled by them. For me, it only highlights the importance of continuing to do work towards prison abolition and finding ways to implement transformative justice into our lives. Meeting, sharing and connecting with other activists and artists who also work towards dismantling the prison industrial complex can be an wonderfully encouraging and supportive experience in this regard. I find myself experiencing small moments of hope in my creative collaborations with others who strive to instigate social change through their work and art.

The *Worlds Without Prisons: Emerging Visions in Science Fiction* workshop and film project was an incredible experience that facilitated the creation of new connections between activists and artists Nikki Shaffeeullah, Romina Hernández, Amina Mohamed, Lolo Sirois, Ariane Lorrain and myself. Drawing from Imarisha and brown's visionary fiction, which encourages the use of science fiction to re-envision all systems at once and experiment with our visions for social change, we co-created a science fiction film to explore what our needs for accountability and safety could look like. Although the initial question of the research-project was intended as 'What are the possibilities to create worlds without prisons through science fiction and collective filmmaking?', the short film we co-created portrays a world in which prisons are still present, instead acting as an exploration of the paths that may lead us towards creating worlds where prisons no longer exist. Through comedy and satire, we followed the legacy of previous anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist science fiction works, and flipped the generic prison tale against itself by repurposing California Correction Services archival footage and challenging the powers of surveillance technologies. We used a collective filmmaking approach and *Emergent Strategy* principles (brown 23) to create a film that would encompass as much of the workshop participants' visions as possible.

As the participants and I faced various challenges throughout the project and had the re-adjust our aspirations to slightly less ambitious ones in order to meet the timeline and structures of this master's degree, we approached this film as the beginning of a bigger project. I am looking forward to discover what openings are created as we share it with audience and I am excited to see what our collaboration will transform into.

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Appendix A

Workshop Schedule

Saturday:

(10:00 - 10:30) Introduction

(10:30-11:30) Check in about filming + recording

Break

(11:45 - 12:30) Visualization + grounding

(12:30 - 1:30) Discussion about Prison Abolition & this workshop - Facilitation by Participant #7

Lunch

(2:00 - 2:45) Discussion: How could this film help create change? (2:00 - 2:45)

(2:45 - 4:00) Film Screenings: Excerpts from Larissa Sansour's sci fi trilogy, Jafar Panahi's *In film nist* & Peter Collins' *Fly in the Ointment* - Facilitation by Ariane Lorrain & Maude Matton

Sunday

(10:00 - 10:30) Check in

(10:30-11:30) Embodiment / Theater & Sci Fi exercise - Facilitation by Nikki Shaffeeullah

Break

(11:45-12:30) Speculative Sets, Props & Design exercise - Facilitation by Laura Sirois

Lunch

(1:00-3:15) Discussion: creating the film - moving forward!

Break

(3:30-4:00) Closure: Opening portal (3:30-4:00)

++ (optional) ++ Dinner + Nalo Hopkinson's talk at the Concordia Co-op Bookstore

Appendix B

Disruptions

1. Planning to film the New Year's Eve Noise Demonstration at the prison where a participant's relative was incarcerated, but the facility ended up being on lock down for the entire duration of the holidays so the demonstration was cancelled.
2. The cinematographer having too many projects at the same time and had to step down from the filmmaking process as a collective approach was too time consuming.
3. One of the participants relocated to Mexico.
4. The assistant editor got a minor concussion in the midst of the intensive editing period and had to take a break from the project.